

ECOLOGICAL POLITICS AND COMIC REDEMPTION IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE ANTELOPE WIFE*

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Louise Erdrich's 1998 novel *The Antelope Wife* may not strike the reader as a politicized text at first glance. The tone of the novel wavers between tragicomic and comic, and the interrelated stories that form its narrative seem to draw more attention to the personal and universal dimensions of human suffering than to its historical and political causes. Appearances aside, the narrative enacts a sharp critique of the legacy of Euroamerican conquest and the dualistic Western worldview underlying it, and I believe that Erdrich's method of displacement and reinvention may be even more effective than a direct challenge would be.

One of the most widely acclaimed Native American writers; she is Anishinaabe-Metis (Ojibway/Chippewa)¹ on her mother's side, German-American on her father's, and an enrolled member of the North Dakota Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. The Anishinaabe have a long tradition of oral as well as written literature in a variety of genres, including song poems, memoirs and life stories, historical and cultural accounts, and according to literary critic and writer Gerald Vizenor, "claim more published writers than any other tribe on the [North American] continent" (qtd. in Blaeser 3). Although Erdrich has a Masters degree in Creative Writing from Johns Hopkins University (1979) she credits her literary skill more to having grown up in an extended family of storytellers. Her sisters Heid and Lise are also published writers.² Louise's literary production includes seven novels, beginning with *Love Medicine* (1984) which won a National

¹ See Gerald Vizenor's *The People Named the Chippewa*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 for a discussion of the interchangeable terms Ojibway and Chippewa, both European corruptions of a Native word whose meaning scholars disagree on. The people refer to themselves as Anishinaabe (pl. Anishinabeg).

² Heid E. Erdrich was nominated for a Minnesota Book Award in 1998 for her first published collection of poetry, *Fishing for Myth*, (Minneapolis: New Rivers Press, 1997). Her edited collection of native women's writing with Laura Tohe, *Sister Nations: Native American Women Writers on Community*, (Minneapolis: New Rivers Press, 2003) was also nominated for this award. See *Storytellers*: <http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers/HErdrich/>. Accessed 15 March, 2004.

Book Critics Award, followed by *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace*, *Tales of Burning Love*, *The Antelope Wife*, *The Last Report of the Miracles at Little No Horse*, (a Minnesota Book Award Finalist in 2000), and the *Master Butcher's Singing Club* in 2003. Her works also include short stories, a memoir, four collections of poetry, a children's book, essays, and criticism.³

If Erdrich's storytelling ability developed within an imaginative family and a tribe with a long tradition of storytelling in a wide range of genres, her writing has also emerged in the context of the feminist and ecological movements, American Indian political activism, the global struggle for indigenous rights, and recent literary critical movements such as feminism, postcolonialism, and ecocriticism which have challenged Western Enlightenment-based epistemologies. Erdrich's texts integrate elements from both Western forms and tribal storytelling, and often include German-American and Scandinavian as well as Anishinaabe characters. As such they are rich resources for enacting approaches to cultural survival that cross conventional boundaries in gender, ethnicity, religion, and language.

In *The Antelope Wife* Erdrich uses an Anishinaabe worldview and a storytelling voice as a starting point for inventing her characters. Situated in contemporary Minneapolis, the narrative weaves a series of smaller narrative threads around three families, the Roys, the Shawanos, and the Whiteheart Beads spanning five generations from the 1880s to the 1990s. These interconnected stories also enable her to rewrite the popular Anglo-American genre of the captivity narrative by combining it with trickster discourse. She begins with the story of Scranton Roy, a Calvary soldier who kills an old woman in a raid on an Ojibwa village and then captures and adopts her grandchild. Years later, the child's mother kidnaps her back, but soon dies, and the girl is adopted by a herd of antelope. One of her descendents, the "antelope wife" of the book's title, is kidnapped, tied up, and taken back to the city by an Indian trader named Klaus Shawano who eventually releases her. Erdrich's stories not only weave a traditional worldview into the Western form of the novel. They also provoke the reader to ask what is at stake in the claim to historical truth. The narrative opens up perspectives on a variety of

³ *Voices from the Gaps, Women Writers of Color: Louise Erdrich.* <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/authors/LouiseErdrich.html>, accessed April 2002.

ways of interpreting the past through stories that often cross boundaries between history and myth, and between indigenous trickster stories and Anglo-American stories of Indian captivity. Reflective readers will also be kept actively searching for better ways of negotiating our own, inevitably mixed relationships to the legacy of European colonization, wherever we find live on the globe.

Literary critic Joseph Meeker, in his book *The Comedy of Survival*, suggests one analytical framework, which I find useful for making sense of Erdrich's literary strategies of displacement. In this study he rewrites Aristotle's interpretation of tragedy as representing the lives of superior humans, in contrast to comic representations of ordinary people. Meeker argues that, to the contrary, both tragedy and comedy are ways of responding to misfortune. Not all catastrophe is tragedy; rather, tragedy is a particular pattern that Western culture has developed over many centuries to deal with loss, grief, and death. It elevates suffering by locating it according to a hierarchical, polarized idea of contrasts: good and evil, light and dark, God and the devil, truth and falsehood, male and female, friend and enemy. Tragedy occurs when one commits oneself to the positive end of the pair, and then suffers because of the corresponding negative end. King Lear, for example, lets his life depend on the loyalty of his children, and then suffers their betrayal. The tragic mode, argues Meeker, demands that one understand reality as a contest between warring camps, then consciously choose sides and bear the consequences (Meeker 14). Although tragedy may be an outmoded form of aesthetic expression in our postmodern culture, the Manichean worldview on which it is based is alive and well in the rhetoric of economic and ideological globalization (Meeker 34). One need only listen to the religious rhetoric of the Christian right and read the transcript of George W. Bush's 2004 State of the Union Address to be reminded of this fact.

In contrast, Meeker notes that the comic way in Western tradition most likely has its origins in Comus, the Greek demigod of fertility, but also that the comic way is found universally, in contrast to the particular dualistic mode he argues is more specifically tied to Western epistemologies. Examples can be found in evolutionary history, in the processes of ecology, and in comic literature. For Meeker, comedy in literature illustrates that in order to survive,

humans must accept our limitations and adapt to the world around us, rather than curse fate for our limitations. The comic mode seeks reconciliation and a return to equilibrium using whatever resources are at hand. Its vision is multidimensional and survivalist rather than polarized and idealistic, and therefore it has little use for abstract formulations about the nature of good and evil (Meeker 15).

In Anglo-America, the tragic worldview as characterized by Meeker found one important literary expression in the widely popular genre of the captivity narrative. Gordon M. Sayre, in the Introduction to his *Anthology of American Captivity Narratives* (2000) has noted that as a literary form and cultural paradigm, the captivity narrative has endured and spread through academic and popular American culture as a "realistic chronicle of American life, as ethnographic exploration of Native cultures, or as pulp melodrama of ripped bodices and hairbreadth escapes" (Sayre 6). From a European perspective the form represented a crossroads where historical event met literary narrative, and where white captives became celebrities at the expense of their captors, who were cast as demonic savages. Beginning with John Smith's 1607 story of his capture in Virginia, and Mary Rowlandson's 1676 account of her capture in an attack on her home in Lancaster, Massachusetts, the basic formula has been expressed in hundreds of American narratives. Several of these, including Rowlandson's, John Williams', Jonathan Dickenson's, and Mary Jemison's became best sellers (Sayre 3). While 311 titles are included in the Newberry Library's collected works alone, the theme of captivity has also been integral to numerous works of canonical American fiction such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain. Because of the immense popularity of the genre as documentary history as well as the pliability of its theme into a variety of fictional expressions, it is useful to distinguish between the formulaic plot where an innocent white woman who was attacked and subjected to cruel treatment by her captors, from the phenomenon of captivity. In the formula, the victim eventually managed to escape to freedom or was ransomed, and lived to tell the story of how she survived and overcame the cruel conditions of her captivity. As phenomenon, Sayre suggests a broader definition:

The captivity phenomenon arises out of encounter between unfamiliar peoples, generally as a result of European imperialism in the Americas and Africa. The two cultures brought into conflict are so foreign to one another that an individual forced into the midst of the other community regards the new life as a kind of imprisonment [...] This "otherness" may be portrayed as racial, religious, or broadly cultural, but [...] it is profound enough that each side regards its own ways as superior, and captivity forces this prejudice to the surface. Most captives yearn to return home, some die in the attempt, but a few embrace their new lives. Generally only those who survive and return are able to record their experiences in a published captivity narrative (Sayre 5).

Sayre's characterization is valuable because it deals with the dynamics of power relations that create "others", not just with the racial or gendered identity of the captors and captives. It would include narratives that don't necessarily portray Indians as "other", as in Geronimo's story about his imprisonment by the US government, or in stories of Africans taken by force from West African villages to slavery in the New World (Sayre 4). Most important, his definition leads us to ask questions about the cultural politics of those stories that break with this formula. For example, what does it mean, politically and psychologically, for a protagonist to willingly go to live with the "other"? What other stories might be told about people from very different cultures that are forced into each other's society? Louise Erdrich addresses these questions through her development of various characters in *The Antelope Wife*.

The historical conditions that set the terms for the encounter between Scranton Roy with the young child he takes would presuppose that, as a white man fighting for the US government, he see her as a child of his enemy and fair game for capture and possession. But the reader quickly learns that his position is more complicated, more in keeping with the complex, comic way described by Meeker. First of all, Scranton Roy is from the state of Pennsylvania and has a Quaker father. The state of Pennsylvania was founded by Quaker William Penn in the 1680s, and governed by member of the Society of Friends, who by conviction are pacifists, for seventy years until the mid-1750s. Penn made and kept treaties with 19 tribes of Indians, and to my knowledge no records exist of any

Indians being killed by whites during those years (Pokagon 215). Even more important for Erdrich's narrative, Scranton Roy is moved by the sight of another human being in pain. As he watches, a dog with a cradleboard and baby tied to its back runs from the site of the killing of her grandmother. This sight "spurs him to human response" and as a consequence he not only deserts the army, but also somehow produces his own milk to nurse the child. The child, in Scranton Roy's arms, "seizes him. Inhales him. Her suck was fierce. His whole body was astonished, most of all the inoffensive nipple he'd never noticed or appreciated" (6).

Ironically, what looks at first glance like a captivity narrative is transformed into a narrative that challenges not only the white/Indian polarity, but also assumptions about biological differences between men and women. This passage suggests that as soon as the child takes hold of Scranton Roy's nipples, she is the one who captures him. He is confused, but the baby refuses to stop, until finally "it occurred to him one slow dusk as he looked down at her, upon his breast that she was teaching him something" (7). The child has lost her mother, and needs a replacement for her; consequently Scranton Roy is transformed into her adopted parent and takes on the role of both father and mother, just as she becomes his adopted child. This sort of change is an extraordinary occurrence in the world of the novel, as it would be in the everyday world of the reader's experience. It is the magnitude of the child's need that allows for the breakdown of ordinary boundaries of gendered reality, and this need is understandable in the context of the loss of lands, language, and culture experienced by Native peoples during the nineteenth century struggle for control of the American plains.⁴

Erdrich's suggestion that individuals can assume new identities (rather than fulfill the characteristic expectations Anglo-American captivity narrative formula where the polarized racial categories of identity are reinforced) has precedents in historical accounts among Native peoples long before white contact. In Iroquois tradition, for example, taking captives in war was seen as a way of adding to the strength of a village. It usually wasn't done for ransom money or as

⁴ For an eloquent and well-documented historical account of the U.S. government's systematic attempts to destroy Native cultures in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, (New York: Holt, 1970).

an act of terrorism (Sayre 8). A number of French missionaries, several captives, and soldiers wrote detailed accounts about this process. They observed that when an individual died and left a gap in the social fabric, his or her female relatives would often encourage male members of the village to organize a raid on an enemy tribe and to take captives. If the war party succeeded, the captives would be presented to the families of the dead person for possible adoption. If adopted, the person would take on the name, social position, and responsibilities of the deceased. Although the French missionaries were astonished that the adoptee would frequently go to war against their own parents and members of their original community, the tribes took it for granted that those adopted would take on their new identities (Sayre 8).

In Erdrich's narrative, both Scranton Roy and the child assume new identities when they respond to their shared biological and emotional needs to survive. She figuratively adopts him as her lost parent, and he adopts her and names her Matilda, after the mother he left when he joined the Calvary (10). She is thus no longer an outside "other" but rather an inside link to his past.

In a second incident involving captivity, the boundaries between humans and animals are similarly crossed. It is a dog that provides a link between the two narratives: When Scranton Roy first nurses Matilda, he looks around, relieved to find that "there was only a dog" to witness his action (6). What he does not realize is that at the same time he is nursing the child, the child's mother is, somewhere else, being comforted in her grief over her lost daughter by another small dog, which she begins to nurse and keep alive (12). For Europeans, dogs have a lower epistemological status than humans, but for many indigenous peoples, animals and humans have different yet equally valuable intelligences. In *The Antelope Wife* dogs are important agents of change, and they serve as doubles for absent humans. The dog nursed by Blue Prairie Woman, Matilda's mother, temporarily takes the place of her lost daughter, and it keeps nearby for as long as she searches for her child (15). It waits with her; literally as well as figuratively the little dog and the mother help each other survive until Blue Prairie woman finds her way to where Matilda is living with Scranton Roy, and captures her back.

Matilda's response to her capture can be understood at several levels. She leaves a written account, in the form of a direct statement to her father and stepmother: *She came for me. I went with her* (16). At one level, this short note can be seen as an ironic commentary on the many first-person captivity narratives that became best sellers. Unlike the sensational accounts of struggle in many popular accounts, this one seems strangely devoid of feeling, given the years of emotional attachment developed between Matilda and her adopted father. It upsets the reader's expectations for at least some kind of struggle, or at least questioning on Matilda's part. At another level, the italics Erdrich uses in the short text mirror the one remaining poem fragment left by the original Matilda the poet, and can be seen as a dialogue with it. The poem asked the intended listener to "come to me [thou dark inviolate]" and now Matilda responds, "I went with her." Although the readers don't know whether Scranton Roy ever saw this poem, the narrator connects it with what happens between the second Matilda and Scranton Roy. Finally, the note is "penned in the same exquisite, though feminized handwriting of her father" (16). Erdrich intertwines identities of white and Indians, as Matilda has learned the handwriting of her white father, and uses it to announce her departure from his world. Finally, however interdependent the identities of the Ojibway girl and her adopted white family have become, the narrator provides the reader with textual clues that make the departure credible. "Sorrow" is the name of the little dog her mother nursed in her own daughter's (Matilda) absence, and it is during these years that Matilda, only subconsciously aware of her mother's search for her, is "afflicted by an anxious sorrow" which she senses but cannot rationally explain.

Blue Prairie Woman becomes ill and dies soon after she kidnaps her daughter back, leaving her alone on the plains. Yet Matilda's story does not end in tragic isolation. Rather, it signals a reconnection by way of Meeker's comic path to finding equilibrium in one's environment. She responds, not out of fear or desperation about being left alone without a father or mother, but rather out of curiosity about what elements in her immediate context might help her survive. Matilda finds herself surrounded by a herd of curious antelope that adopt her (20), and her descendents become the "antelope people" from which the book gets its title. The link between

her and animal life (represented in both dogs and antelope) continues through the five generations spanned in the novel.

Tales of humans going to live with animals, spirits, or with beings who waver between human and spirit forms are often the subject of tribal stories, and frequently these stories include the figure of the trickster.⁵ Trickster behavior is contradictory and ambiguous. Characterized by an exaggerated appetite for food, sex, and knowledge, he or she can be clever or foolish, tricky or tricked, a spoiler or a benefactor. Although usually a solitary figure that lives on the margins of tribal society, the trickster is a powerful force for balance and survival of the community. In one Anishinaabe tale, for example, the trickster Nanaboozo is caught in a tree after a great flood and sends various animals diving into the water to bring up bits of earth to make the world habitable for humans (Barnouw 40 quoted in Stoupe 35). In other tales he transforms various body parts into food, or he invents a substitute tobacco (Stoupe 34). In a less flattering tale he breaks wind while sitting in church on Ascension Day, and mass has to be cancelled for a week until the building is aired out (Erdrich *Jacklight*). In whatever form he or she appears, however, the trickster contributes to the overall well being of the tribe.

Erdrich frequently develops trickster characters in her fiction. In *The Antelope Wife*, these function as mediators who draw attention to, and respond to various interpretations of the captivity phenomenon; Erdrich's stories about kidnapping embrace tribal understandings of the world where it is important that balance be returned to the social fabric of a community. At the same time her text displaces the Euro-American captivity narrative with its polarized definitions of good and evil, insiders and outsiders.

A third incident involving the taking of captives in *The Antelope Wife* occurs in the 1990s, over a hundred years after the story of Matilda Roy's adoptions by Scranton Roy and the antelope people.

⁵ The cultural role of Native American tricksters has been of interest to anthropologists, folklorists, and literary scholars. Paul Radin's *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), has become a seminal (as well as disputed) text. See also Jarald Ramsey, *Reading the Fine: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Kimberly Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*; (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996); and Jeanne Smith Rosier, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

Of the three examples I have discussed, this one most closely resembles a conventional captivity narrative; the captive is taken against her will, and she is not assimilated to her new life. It also suggests some similarities between trickster discourse and Meeker's understanding of the comic mode. In this incident, Klaus Shawano, an Indian trader, meets a woman and her three daughters on a reservation in Elmo, Minnesota. He falls in love with her, and against the advice of a wise old man named Jimmy Badger who warns him against interfering with the "antelope people" to whom she belongs, he decides to kidnap her and bring her back to the city to be his wife. With excess food, jokes, and talk, he tries to seduce her and her daughters as he shows them his large stash of baked beans, corn, fry bread, molasses cookies, and prepares heaped plates of food for them to eat. When he finally manages to lure her into his van and drives away, he observes, "she is confused by the way I want her" (28). This reaction reminds the reader of Scranton Roy's confusion about the way Matilda wanted him. But where Scranton Roy was transformed by Matilda Roy, the Antelope Wife remains distinctly who she already is, and continues to look for a means of escape. To keep her with him, Klaus has to tie her up with yards of calico, which he uses both to bandage her cuts, and also to restrain her. This includes one strip put "gently" across her bleeding mouth (30). The name he gives her, Sweetheart Calico, alludes to her captive state and her inability to talk. In a reversal of the conventional captivity formula, she can't speak in the beginning, and won't, later in the novel.

Yet in one chapter, written from her narrative perspective, readers learn that she does in fact have her own language in dreams, and that the memory of where she comes from is preserved. Klaus has less control over her than he or the readers might have assumed: "At night, she remembered running beside her mother [...] Klaus, she never dreamed about or remembered. He was just the one she was tied to, who brought her here." (51). Still, "no matter how fast or far she walked she couldn't get out of the city" (52). While at first it might seem to the other characters that she doesn't know how to deal with her situation, she does in fact have some covert trickster strategies at her disposal. What she does is to set in motion a larger process of displacement, which eventually restores balance to the lives of some of the other characters, including Klaus. Just as a dog took the place

of Blue Prairie Woman's daughter when she disappeared after her capture by Scranton Roy, likewise a dog takes the place of Sweetheart Calico in Klaus's life whenever she is out walking.

Klaus is visited, or rather harassed, by a figure he calls «windigo dog» (after the mythical cannibal monster of Northern tribal tales)⁶ who regularly comes to talk to him, grinning and berating him about his drinking, and telling dirty dog jokes. The dog begins his joke telling with the greeting: "Boozhoo (Anishinaabe "hello") Klaus, you are the most screwed-up, sad, fucked-in-the-face, toxic, skyaybee, irredeemable drunk I've talked to yet today" (126-127). Although this dog gets the blame for starting Klaus in his drinking, he ironically saves Klaus's life. Klaus is sleeping by a bush in the park with only his head sticking out, when a young man on a motorized lawnmower runs over his head. Miraculously, he doesn't lose his head and his life, but instead is marked with a «neat bloody crease down the exact middle of his face" (225). At the same time, a stray dog who is most likely the "windigo dog" bolts toward the machine, gets hit, slams into the air, then bounces off a tree and vanishes" (225). As a consequence Klaus decides to give up drinking and to release Sweetheart Calico. The reality of her power might be difficult to define or prove, but it is also difficult for Klaus to avoid seeing the connection between the dog's appearances and pranks, and his wife.

This power is also difficult for another character to articulate, Klaus's niece Cally Whiteheart Beads. Cally notices that "[Aunty Calico, as she calls her] scatters my wits" (107). She comes up and gives Cally a "boney hug" when she is on the phone, embracing her in a "long stranglehold that twists me in the phone cord so I can't speak. I can't get rid [of the smell of her perfume]. It smells like grass and wind. Makes me remember running in the summer with my hair flopping on my shoulders [...]" (107). Cally, in this passage, experiences the same kind of confusion felt by Scranton Roy generations earlier, and like him, she realizes she has something to learn: "[Aunty Calico] alters the shape of things around her and she changes the shape of things to come. She upsets me, then enlightens me with her truthless stare" (106). The process of

⁶ See Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway*, (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Press, 2001), 221-277.

"changing the shape of things to come" is enacted in the change in conventional image of a "ruthless stare" to a "truthless" one. More important, it has implications for the characters including Klaus, and also for Cally as a narrator of the novel. Although the narrator in the opening chapters of the novel about Scranton Roy doesn't identify who she is, most likely she is an older Cally who by this time has recognized the vital importance of remembering the past. Scranton Roy's story, the narrator tells the reader, "lives on, though fading in the larger memory, and I relate it here in order that it not be lost" (4). The process of "changing the shape of things" is thus about changing the shape of the conventional white captivity narrative, and breaking down some of the perceived oppositions between whites and Indians, and men and women.

Equally important, the story of Klaus's wife as the Antelope Wife suggests that particular elements of indigenous memory cannot be translated into forms understandable within Western frameworks. At the end of the novel, the only appropriate response is to release Sweetheart Calico rather than to have her story explained. In this context, Meeker's comic mode of reconciliation only partially helps us make sense of the trickster discourse Erdrich uses. For Erdrich, reconciliation with Western expectations for narrative closure is not the point. To the contrary, the trickster discourse represented by Sweetheart Calico (as the Antelope Wife) is about mediation in a different sense. Mediation in the context of writing by indigenous authors, notes critic Jarald Ramsey, "does not mean compromise and reconciliation [as it is often to mean in Western cultural contexts. Rather] it is a continuing process of the mind, not a transitional step toward some conclusion" (Blaeser 145). As critic Louis Owens notes, the trickster represents a powerful force of "vitality, adaptability, and continuance" (quoted in Blaeser 143).⁷

The novel may, finally, be more about comic redemption, about allowing the self and others to simply *be*, than about the politics of the comic. Returning to my claim at the start of this paper, I revise it: to claim that *The Antelope Wife* is a political novel is probably too narrow a reading of its vision. Erdrich not only displaces Western

⁷ My use of the term mediation has also been influenced by James Ruppert in *Mediation in Contemporary Native America Fiction*. (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

dualisms; she also makes it possible to imagine a world where particular Indians and whites, men and women, and humans and animals all make mistakes, but also a world where each of their lives is worth acknowledging as having the power to influence collective memory, and to reinvent the past in order to create openings for a redeemable future. At the same time, good stories like the ones told by Erdrich's narrator in *The Antelope Wife* are a continuing menace to grand narratives such as Manifest Destiny and popular forms such as the captivity narrative. They hook the reader with their new twist on the familiar, and simply don't let go before the conventional stories of conquest are rewritten.

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